

E 601
.B44
Copy 1

Military Order *
of the
Loyal Legion
of the
United States
*—

COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WAR PAPER 28.

Recollections of a Bummer.





Military Order of the Loyal Legion

OF THE

United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPERS.

28

Recollections of a Bummer.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Major

CHARLES E. BELKNAP,

Late U. S. V.,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF JANUARY 5, 1898.

Recollections of a Bummer.

When Sherman's army moved out of the city of Atlanta, Ga., November 16, 1864, the term "Bummer" had not been coined; and a few days later, when it came into existence as a term or name, was applied only to those details from regiments and brigades whose duty it was to gather in the "forage" of the country passed through for the subsistence of the men and animals that made up the army. There was a limited supply of food in the trains of each corps and in the haversacks of the men, but we were to take no chances on its holding out until another "base of supplies" could be reached.

The writer that fall was eighteen years of age, with more than two years of active service to his credit, from the rank of private to that of captain. During the preceding years there had been some opportunities to forage from the plantations of Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia. In a sort of mild and genteel way, pigs and chickens had been chased about the farms and surreptitiously inveigled into camp, to the great scandal of regimental, brigade and division commanders; but now had come the time when the men were commanded to not only chase the chickens and pigs, but the cows and sheep as well. Everything on foot and wing, all the things of the earth and air, were "contraband of war."

The first day out details of men were made out of each regiment "to go out foraging," each under command of a lieutenant or captain, each acting independently of the other. There was but little left to forage in the country about Atlanta. Many of these men were physically and morally unfit

for the duty. Two, three and often more of these small independent parties came together about the cabin of a poverty stricken "Cracker" and the combats that ensued for the possession of the live stock, mostly "mountain shad," threatened for the time being to destroy the brotherly love said to exist between the various regiments of the army. If a rich find was made, the men were loaded with all they could carry, and the torch did away with the balance to the great distress of those who got in a few minutes later. Then again these small parties were not made up to fight, and when a half dozen of "Wheeler's Critterbacks" got after them all the foragers of the corps took to the woods for safety; in their wild flight chickens were left orphans by the wayside. Hams, pickles, preserves and honey were cast aside with reckless prodigality, and the detailed forager found his way to his command two or three days later with harrowing tales of hairbreadth escapes. He usually brought in his gun and cartridges, but was minus the good hardtack and coffee that filled his haversack when he went out with the squad.

The writer's detail had just this experience the second day out of Atlanta. That night a conference was held at brigade headquarters and orders went out for a brigade detail the next day. Thirty men, volunteers from each of the three regiments of the brigade, each under command of a lieutenant, all under command of a captain. To this command I was assigned and held until the surrender of Johnston's army in 1865.

This brigade detail was made up that night and left camp before daylight the next morning, nearly every man well mounted. It was well that they got away so early, as very few of them could show a good title to the animal he rode, but as there was a great deal of swapping and trading horses

and mules that day about every man came back to the command with a clear conscience. This was the first brigade of organized foragers, and their success in many lines soon led to other organizations throughout the army.

I do not remember of hearing the term "Bummer" applied to these men until just before the capture of Savannah, and then as a "Boomer," from the almost constant booming of the enemy's guns as they were harrassed on all sides, either by the foragers or Kilpatrick's Cavalry—but pardon the digression.

The ninety men and their lieutenants that made up the command were time tried and true. If one was killed or wounded, which was often the case, another volunteer was called from the regiments, and in all cases the details were kept full.

After the first day there was but little trouble in keeping the command well mounted, and forage being plenty a return was made to the command each night; but in many of the sparsely settled sections of the country it was two or three days before a load could be gathered up, the detail often going fifty miles away upon the flanks. Skirmishing with parties of cavalry and "Home-guards" was of hourly occurrence, and the word went out from Wheeler's com^r and "Death to all foragers." Eleven of the foragers were captured one day and all shot; their bodies being placed in a row by the roadside, that all passing that way might see them and take warning. This did not stop the foraging, but had the effect of weeding out of the commands the less courageous men, and the filling of their places with a more determined lot.

The space of this article will permit only a few of the many interesting adventures of the detail which I commanded; to

write them all would make a book of comedy and tragedy—a book, alternate pages, mirth and sorrow; to-day a feast, yesterday a famine; to dine on broiled chicken and turkey, to sup on soup of nigger peas; to-day with victorious shouts driving the enemy away from mill or roadway bridges; to-night gathered about a shallow grave in the piney woods, where, with his blanket for his coffin, we fill in the place with moss and drop the parting tear to a comrade brave and true.

Out upon the flanks one day a party of Wheeler's men were found; they, too, were foraging—had their animals well loaded with all sorts of plunder, useful and ornamental. "We rushed them," to use a modern term, capturing the outfit, taking a rich prize to camp that night.

As the rumor of the advance of the army reached the people frantic efforts were made to conceal not only their valuable personal effects, plate, jewelry and other rich goods, but also every article of food, the common place of concealment being under the floors of the houses, buried in the door yards and in the swamps, if one was near. With untiring zeal the foragers prodded the ground with rain-rod and bayonet. It was certainly comical to see a group of these military agriculturists punching the unoffending earth in an apparently idiotic way. The universal digging was good for the garden, but the results were very distressing to the owners of exhumed property who saw it irretrievably confiscated. One day, well out in front of the army, when from around a bend in the road came the sounds of a man's voice in prayer. The advance guard moved quietly forward until he came in sight of a black man kneeling by the roots of a pine tree with uplifted hands and face. He was asking God for freedom from his bondage, praying to be guided to the Union Army, and the

voice of his devotion filled our hearts with a strange emotion, for his tones by turns were sad, then sweetly solemn, then wildly glad, as he prayed for the white folks, his master and mistress, to whom all things were bright and fair, to whom all things were pure and free; then for his race upon whom "the curse of Cain had fallen" like a flail on garnered grain, and struck them to the earth. Then echoed through the woods prayers that God might guide the Union Army safely through all dangers, and on "dis berry road, Lord." The advancing tramp of the horses' feet caused him to open his eyes when they were almost upon him. His surprise was so great that for a moment he was speechless. Then he fairly yelled with delight, his prayers were answered, the Lord had sent us specially for his deliverance. In reply to my questions, he said: "I'se only a runaway nigger, and days and nights in the dark woods and dismal swamps I've skulked and hidden away, and I've seen the fires of the midnight camp, and heard many times the patrols' tramp, and the bloodhounds' savage bay; but now I'se free. I dun gib ole massa de slip, and I'se gwine wid you-all."

In the years before the war nearly every plantation had its pack of hounds for tracking runaway slaves. During the war these dogs were often used to track the Union soldiers who were lucky enough to escape from the rebel prisons. Many a luckless fellow has been treed and recaptured by the use of these dogs. The foragers never spared any of them, but killed them at sight.

One day we passed a lot of cabins; in the doorway of one of them, some distance from the road, stood an aged negro, so old his hair was white as snow. Between his legs there crowded a large dog; probably neither dog nor man had ever set eyes on a blue-coated soldier before, and both seemed

dumb with surprise. A soldier quick to see the dog, raised his gun and fired. The dog yelped once, the man dropped upon the animal in the doorway and yelled a dozen times. Hearing the noise I hurried to the spot, and asked, "Who fired that shot?" No one could tell. Going to the cabin I helped the colored brother up and found the dead dog. "Who killed this dog?" I inquired. "Don't know," said one of the soldiers, "but I guess the nigger fell on him."

That same day the "Bummers" captured a plantation rich in chickens and other useful articles. While the men were busy twisting the necks off the chickens and gathering eggs, a troop of Wheeler's men came down on us like a whirlwind, and drove the boys to the shelter of the woods near by. Then hasty preparations were made for a fight that was sure to come for the possession of the place. "The lady of the house" came out and offered her help to whip the Yankees. The Confederate officer told her that was right. If you want to help us get up there on that fence and holler at them and dare them to come out for a fair fight. She got upon "the top rail" and shaking her fist, shouted, "Oh you miserable Yankees. You have taken every chicken on the place." "What's that," said the Confederate, "taken all the chickens? Then there's nothing left here worth fighting for." And he called his men out of the fence corners and rode away, leaving the woman on top of the fence, so busy calling names and shaking her fists she did not notice his absence until the "miserable Yankees" returned to gather up the odds and ends so hurriedly left.

But a few days out of Atlanta, in a sandy, poverty-stricken region, a very thinly-populated district, miles away to the left of the route followed by that wing of the army, we found in a small log cabin two wee bits of girls, one about three, the

other five years old, the only living objects about the place. In the cabin were a few rude housekeeping articles, a bed in one corner that would not tempt a soldier out of a horse stable as a sleeping place, and a bake kettle, a few gourds and a home-made "piggin" were about all to forage on. The little ones so nearly dead of starvation and neglect could tell us nothing, only "mamma gone, mamma gone." Clothed in nothing but thin cotton dresses, black with dirt and grease, no underclothing, their little bare legs and arms so grimed with dirt that at first we thought them "darkies."

The little cotton dresses were but bags with a hole left for arms and neck. They were as shy as young partridges, but food soon won their confidence. A search was made all about the premises for other living beings, but the little ones were absolutely alone, but for the birds that chirped about in the tree-tops near by. The command halted to feed and rest their animals, a fire was built on the hearth and the babies given a bath with warm water and fed on soldiers' grub; their tangled flaxen hair was combed, and well washed they were as pretty a capture as ever made by the "Bummers Bold."

Resuming our march we tried to give them away at the next cabin a few miles on our route, but that would not work—the woman had a house full of her own. She knew nothing about these two, and so half a dozen places were visited, but with war's desolation in the country none could be found to care for our motherless girls. But before night the Bummers had a wardrobe for them worthy of the command, a piece here and there as the cabins were passed, were borrowed. Before the night camp was reached, a soldier who had babies of his own in Michigan removed the dirty cotton gowns, and clothed them in the plunder of the afternoon; "they were just

too sweet for anything." They were mounted on a pack mule that day; at night they slept cuddled up in a soldier's arms. The rain dripped down through the pine trees, drenching the blankets of the tentless soldier, but the little ones were as comfortable as "bugs in a rug." These two sisters were turned over to the regiment next day; by turns they were toted on the backs of the soldiers to Savannah. The authorities of the city were notified but nobody had time for "the little white trash." A lieutenant, wounded and sick, was granted a furlough; he took them home to the State where they reside to-day in happy homes, beautiful in their motherhood. Although diligent search was made after the war, the mystery was never solved. They are simply two of "Sherman's Bummers."

As the army approached Savannah the field work of the Bummers became very much restricted; then much of the time was spent in clearing the roads of fallen timber. The Bummers were everywhere at the front and flank, better than any cavalry force. It has always been my conviction since those days that a Bummer would put up a stronger fight for a general assortment of plantation provisions than a whole regiment would from pure patriotism and love of country. In strategy they developed strong flanking tendencies. If the bridge or fords were well guarded, they went up or down the stream always, waded or swam the often icy waters, then angled across the country, and were soon on the enemy's lines of communications, and the enemy had to take to the woods to save themselves.

In my own experience the Bummers did their greatest work in the Carolinas, but I must confine my memories to only one or two more incidents.

At one place in North Carolina the Bummers found the hid-

ing place of two hundred good mules and a lot of horses, but so situated that a reserve force to guard communications was needed. The information was detailed to General Carlin who sent a regiment of infantry to assist. There were two streams to cross, the Haw river by a scow ferry, a deep and rapid stream, and then some distance on the New river, by a foot bridge. Between the two streams was a good-sized town full of "liquid supplies." Up the country between the two streams was Hampton's Cavalry, beyond the New river a few miles were the coveted mules. A supply depot guarded by convalescents, about twenty-five miles from General Carlin's camp. The Bummers crossed the Haw on the scow, swimming their horses, left a small guard as a lookout in the town, passed on over the New river and surprised the supply camp, getting all of the stock away safely, but followed closely by the enemy.

Crossing the bridge it was burned, and we were comparatively safe from that quarter, but in the town we "met up with a circus." The regiment under command of a major had safely crossed the Haw on the scow ferry, having nothing else just then to do, accepted the hospitalities of the people, and from major to ambulance driver were howling full of apple-jack. But the boys all claimed that it was persimmon beer that threw down the chaplain. A regiment three hundred strong drunk in a hostile town, a deep and rapid stream, a scow ferry, camp twenty-five miles beyond; Hampton's men coming down the neck, guided by the hospitable mayor of the town, who was quick to see a joke. But it was here the Bummer showed his loyalty to comrades in distress. The totally disabled were loaded into wagons, tied upon mules and horses, and in various ways taken to the ferry, which by constant passages and swimming animals succeeded in getting all across.

Scattering shot from Hampton's troopers hurried the rear guard in the last hour of their trying duties. Once across the stream, the regiment was left to take care of itself. The captured animals were of the greatest value to the division trains. 'Tis said that that regiment did not all get back to the division for three days. The Major's saber dangled from the tent pole of the division commander for a time; then came the end of the war and all errors of judgment were forgotten. A few days before this last occurrence, while hunting the pine barrens "for nubbins of corn," things got very interesting for the Bummers. Forage was very scarce and the enemy very plenty. One of the men, a daring, dashing fellow, fell behind the command. In coming up he missed the road and followed the road to the left, that led him suddenly into a company of Dibrell's command. Too late to retreat, he charged single-handed into their midst using his Colt's revolving rifle with deadly effect. The enemy gave him a volley, four bullets hitting him; then a trooper gave him a cut on the head with his sabre, unhorsing him. They stopped long enough to take his outfit and left him for dead in the woods. That evening, while the command was grinding corn at a small wet day mill, a woman came in telling us of the occurrence. With a couple of men and a horse I followed the woman two or three miles through the woods to the place, and found the man not dead but very near it. We placed him on the horse, and giving the woman a roll of money (Confederate) went back to the mill. That man was carried in an ambulance several days, and is living to-day, although badly crippled.

The day after this occurrence one of the lieutenants of the command was ambushed and killed; not being satisfied with filling him full of lead they put a trail rope about his neck and pulled him up over the limb of a roadside tree, where we found him. We followed the trail and squared accounts that night.

It was a most uncomfortable night, the rain came down in a ceaseless pour. We had been out on the flanks all day in the worst sort of luck—not enough food in the country to feed a crow. Men and animals were tried out, and lost. We followed a black streak through the pine forest,,a trail of mud, quicksand and water. Where the road led I neither knew nor cared, so long as it led to a place of shelter for the night, which to our tired animals it seemed we would never find. A faint light in the far distance finally led us out of the forest and to a group of cabins and the master's house. The cabins were deserted except by one old bed-ridden negro; they had gone to "jine the army." The light was from the "great house"—a faint glimmer of a fire upon the hearth. The men soon found dry places for themselves and animals; one man placed on the road "to watch for sounds," and I went to the great house thinking I might get a chance to sleep and dry my clothing before the fire. To my tap upon the door came a faint response "Come in." Opening the door I passed through a hallway into a large well furnished room. Before the fire sat a woman, whose face in the dim glimmer of the pine knots on the hearth was ghastly, a face of mingled fear and pain. I quickly doffed my water-soaked hat and great coat and said: "Madam, by your permission I will build up a fire. I am very wet and cold." The fire of pine knots quickly flashed up, lighting the room in seeming defiance of the rain and gloom outside. "Oh, sir, I see you are not one of our folks. You are a Federal soldier." "I am, Madam, a captain of Sherman's army. I do not want to intrude, but with your permission we will sit here before the fire. My men are in the negro quarters for the night. Where are your people?" "Oh, sir, my husband is in Lee's army, but dead or alive I don't know. It is weeks since I heard from him, and the ser-

vants and field hands have all gone like a lot of crazy children. They gathered a few articles of food and clothing and have gone to Sherman's army, but, sir, I know you are a friend." Then she said some things in such a delicate way, that young and green as I was I could not help but understand. Is there a neighbor near?" "Yes, two miles away. A good woman, who would come to me if she knew."

Going out to the cabins where great fires were burning in the chimneys, the men drying themselves out, I found one of my men who had wife and babies in Michigan. I quickly told him all and sent him into the house. Then I saddled my horse, found a side saddle in the barn and put that on another animal, then with one of the Bummers for company started up the plantation road to find the neighbor. That was the longest two miles I ever travelled, and finally was welcomed by a pack of barking, howling dogs, that snarled and snapped at us from side, front and rear. With a piece of fence rail I drove them away and held a parley with the woman inside, who at first said it was "a dirty Yankee trick" to entice a lone woman away to destruction.

Several arguments were used, mingled in with some cuss words on the part of the soldier with me, which persuaded her to come along. The return trip was made at a good pace, our fair prize scolding and crying by turns until we pulled up to the great house again. Lew had a roaring fire on the great open hearth. A pot of old Government Java "was steaming on the coals." Lew and the new arrival held a council of war. I put out my horse and lay down long after midnight, before a fire in one of the cabins to sleep, drenched to the skin, aching in every joint, wondering what would be the Bummers' lot next day.

Going to the house next morning, Lew, the Bummer, sat

before the fire with a bundle in his arms, singing in a lullaby sort of a voice:

" I'm a raw recruit, in a brand new suit,
Nine hundred dollars bounty;
And I've come down from the tar heel town,
To fight for North Caroliny."

Far sweeter than the notes the song birds sing were the sounds that came from the recruit in response to the song of the grizzled old soldier, who, with tears in his manly eyes, was thinking of the wife and babies in far away Michigan, whom he had not seen in nearly three long weary years of war.

Someone has said that babies are the flowers of hope that grow upon the trellis of our hearts.

We christened that one with a canteen of applejack, and named him Billy Sherman, and took for our reward the family carriage loaded with dead pigs, some corn and chickens, and other things necessary to the conduct of the army.

From the Major-General commanding the Department of Virginia at the close of the war I received the following account of the first soldiers of Sherman's army to reach Washington at the close of the war. The country about Washington was full of stragglers and thieves, men of both armies. One morning early two men put in their appearance on the main highway from Richmond. They were splendidly mounted on horses well fagged out, dashing young fellows, armed to kill, bronzed, tanned, ragged.

The guard brought them to a halt. "Who are you?" "We are the advance of Sherman's army on the way to Washington and home."

They were taken to headquarters, where the General said: "How is it you are here while the army has not yet reached Richmond?"

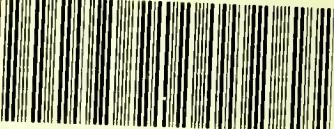
"Well, you see, General, we have made it our business to keep in the front; that's how it is." In spite of their protests they were taken to the guard house and kept until the army arrived two weeks later. They had started the day Johnson surrendered, six days before, passing to the west of Richmond to avoid complications. Their outfit was returned to them after their release, with an apology.

It is to be regretted that the names and regiments of these two men are not known. It was but a fair illustration of the enterprise of Sherman's Bummers.





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 763 913 0